

“Healings – Noticing Others”

Mark 1:29–34; Mark 2:1–12; Mark 10:46–52

The true story

For three short years Jesus traveled around Galilee, Judea, Samaria, and even the Gentile area known as the Decapolis. He proclaimed the arrival of God’s kingdom and taught what it meant for everyone. He also ministered to many. He healed the blind, enable the crippled to walk, fed the hungry, and cast out demons. We must grasp that in these healings and exorcisms he was enacting the kingdom of God. For in God’s kingdom there are no blind or lame and there is no place for the demons and all creatures who choose against God. Here are three healing stories from Mark’s gospel.



Healing Peter’s Mother-in-Law

At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus and a few disciples head for Capernaum, a small town on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. On Saturday, Jesus went to the synagogue and taught. Not surprisingly, everyone was astounded at the teaching and the authority with which he spoke. At one point, a man burst into the room. When the man spoke it was clear that he was possessed by demons, who challenged Jesus, knowing even his identity. Jesus quickly cast them out, demonstrating his authority for in God’s kingdom there are no demons. Thus, they have no hold on Jesus. As we might guess, the crowds were stunned -- “Who is that even the unclean spirits obey!!”

But Jesus, Peter, and their small group made the short walk to Peter’s home in Capernaum, where Jesus learned that Peter’s mother-in-law was sick with fever. This is such a small story, but it is so beautiful. Jesus walks over to the bed where the woman is lying, takes her hand, and lifts her up. The fever was gone and Peter’s mother-in-law got up to serve the disciples as she had been served.

This is not a grand, huge story -- just the simple outworking of the kingdom ushered in and through Jesus. Now we turn to another healing in Capernaum, in which we learn even more about Jesus and his truest identity.

A Story of Friends

How far would we go for our friends? Would we go as far as Jesus went? He set the bar high: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). Let’s make the question easier. How far would we go to introduce a friend to Jesus? Today’s story is about some friends who were willing to go to extreme lengths to get their friend to Jesus. They got a lot more than they expected.

After healing Peter’s mother-in-law of her fever, Jesus went on a preaching tour of Galilee, and then in Mark 2:1, we learn that “when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home.” From whom had they heard this? Their friends and neighbors, of course. And people came in droves. They didn’t have the internet, but Jesus still went viral. And Capernaum was ground zero for the phenomenon.

Coming to Jesus

Capernaum was the hometown of Peter and became Jesus’ “headquarters” during his public ministry. You can visit Capernaum today. The Franciscans have built a modern church over the ruins of Peter’s house. Nearby are the ruins of a new and improved synagogue that was built several centuries after the time of Christ. The new synagogue was built on the foundation of the synagogue in which Jesus preached. The original foundation is still visible.

Once, during one of Jesus’ many stays in Capernaum, Jesus’ home was packed to overflowing with so many people that you couldn’t have gotten through the front door. This seemed to pose an insurmountable problem for anyone who wanted to get to Jesus but hadn’t been able to enter the house before the crowds gathered. Insurmountable, that is, unless you have the right kind of friends. Committed friends. Going-above-and-beyond friends.

One paralyzed man from the area had such friends. When they saw the overcrowding, surely the friends were tempted to simply turn away and try again another time. After all, what could they do? They wanted to help their stricken friend, but they couldn’t walk through walls. Or could they?!

I wonder who first had the idea to lower the paralyzed man through a hole cut in the ceiling. Good grief, it must have sounded crazy. “Cut a hole in the roof? Are you mad? Jesus is down there. It’s his house!” Yet somehow, the idea took hold among this circle of friends. And they did it. Climbed up on the roof, hauling the crippled man with them. They dug through the dirt piled on the house’s roof and made an opening through which they lowered their friend right in front of Jesus.

Who does such a thing? Would I do such a thing? Talk about thinking outside of the box and then actually doing it. They saw an opportunity for their friend to be rescued; one that might never come his way again. And they loved him. And they risked. And he was saved. But the man, and his friends, got much more.

Healing

It’s a safe bet that the friends were focused only on the man’s paralysis. That’s what needed fixing, after all. But the man got more than freedom from his paralysis, he got freedom from his bondage to sin. When the man was set down on the floor of the room, Jesus told him that his sins had been forgiven,¹ not that his paralysis had been healed.

And who is Jesus looking at as he makes his pronouncement of salvation? Not the paralyzed man, but his friends. Mark tells us that “Jesus saw their faith . . .” We are never told exactly what the paralyzed man thought of Jesus. Perhaps there is nothing but desperation on his mind and in his heart. As for the friends, however, we are told all we need to know. Jesus saw their faith, their trust, in this carpenter from Nazareth. And their friend was not only healed of his paralysis but healed also of his sin.

It is important to grasp the significance and the shock in what Jesus told the paralytic. Sins are offenses committed against God; thus, for the Jews, it was only the LORD God, who could forgive sins. Further, the Jews had a perfectly fine system for managing sin forgiveness and that was the temple, not some dusty house in Capernaum. In his commentary on Mark, Alan Culpepper helps us to understand Jesus’ offense.

Jesus’ declaration, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (2:5), can be taken either as a divine passive, meaning “God has forgiven your sins,” or as a statement on his own authority, meaning “I forgive your sins.” The divine passive was often used to avoid a direct reference to the divine name (see 2:20; 3:28; 4:12, 25; etc.). Only God can forgive sins (Exodus 34:6-7; Isa 43:25; 44:22), but God’s prophets at times announced forgiveness: “Nathan said to David, ‘Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die’” (2 Sam 12:13). Even if Jesus used the divine passive, the scribes recognize the authority implied in his statement.

By the time of the New Testament, blasphemy was construed not only as cursing God but as any “violation of the power and majesty of God.” The scribes heard Jesus’ use of the divine passive as either a claim to be able to pronounce the forgiveness of sins or to speak for God. Either way, for them, Jesus was usurping a divine prerogative. According to levitical law, anyone who blasphemes is to be stoned to death (Lev 24:15-16); rabbinic law specified that blasphemy required that one pronounced “the Name itself” and that the offense was confirmed by witnesses (m. Sanhedrin 7.5). The scribes’ question, “Who?” advances one of the Gospel’s main themes by focusing on the issue of Jesus’ identity.

So, as the paralyzed man lay on the floor and the befuddled friends peered down through the hole in the roof, some of the religious authorities (in this case, some scribes) jumped on Jesus about his claim to be forgiving the man’s sins. Didn’t Jesus understand that he was claiming to exercise a power reserved to God?

Of course Jesus understood. He knew exactly what he was doing. But he also knew that anyone could utter the words, “Your sins are forgiven,” even if they were understood to be blasphemous. So, in order that everyone would see that he was not just saying the words but had been given the authority by God to forgive sins, Jesus told the paralytic to get up and walk. It had to be a delayed yet welcome relief for the man and his friends.

I wonder what was running through the once-paralyzed man’s head as he walked outside the house to meet up with his friends who had climbed down from the roof. Was he thinking about the fact that he was WALKING!? Was he thinking about what his friends had done for him? THROUGH THE ROOF! Was he thinking about the man he had just met? All he had wanted was to walk again but he had gotten far more than that. To what sort of life would he return? What sort of man was returning to it?

¹ In their world, afflictions, such as paralysis were seen as God’s punishment for the committing of sins, adding to the burden carried by the injured and the disabled.

The thing about “going viral” is that no one can hope to contain or control it. Word just spreads. If people came in droves before the healing of the paralytic, imagine how they came after, if only to see this man who claimed the authority of God.

“Recovery of sight to the blind” (Luke 4:16)

Bartimaeus is a blind beggar who sits by the side of the road, cup in hand. When he hears that Jesus is passing by, he shouts out to Jesus, begging for mercy. When he shouts out a second time, Jesus calls him over and restores his sight. This is another of those Jesus stories that tempt us to read quickly onward. But Ellsworth Kalas invites us to stop and take a closer look.²

Bartimaeus has lost his health, his livelihood, his reputation, even his name. Because Mark writes that his eyesight was restored, we know that Bartimaeus could at one time see. Now, he has been reduced to begging, having lost whatever means he might have once had of earning a living. Because the ancients, including the Jews, saw blindness and other ailments as indications of God’s disfavor, Bartimaeus is an outcast, a person to be avoided and even forgotten. In fact, he has become such a non-person that he has even lost his name. “Bartimaeus” is actually “bar-Timeaus,” meaning “son of Timeaus.” This was a common way of giving someone a last name of sorts. Thus, Bartimaeus has lost his first name and become about as anonymous as a person can become. In truth, in the community he has become little more than an unnamed blind beggar. More an object than a person.

What is the story of his life? Where is his plot headed? The answer is nowhere. Nothing will change. He’ll just eventually die, hardly noticed, until his body is put in some sort of pauper’s grave.

In an instant, all is changed. When Bartimaeus rushes to meet Jesus, utterly throwing himself on Jesus’ mercy, his life is restored. He finds a new plot. He finds that there is a story for him yet, a story inaugurated by and centered upon his Savior.

Notice what happens at the end of the passage from Mark. Bartimaeus doesn’t resume his begging by the side of the road. He doesn’t even head home to family. There probably is no home and no family. Bartimaeus has come to Jesus (v. 50), trusted Jesus completely, and will now follow Jesus (v. 52). As Jesus heads onward down the road, Bartimaeus follows him. He knows where the story of his own life will now take him.

The stories of our lives

Many of us would be hard-pressed to tell the story of our lives. We could recount past events and we might be able to make a few predictions about the future, or at least lay out some hopes. But finding the purpose in it all, seeing a meaningful narrative . . . well, that is another matter. Early in our lives, we might think that we have enough control to shape our lives and achieve our dreams. But we soon find that dreams change and control eludes us.

Like Bartimaeus, we can find the story we seek only by coming to Jesus, by taking a seat at his table. Life can be difficult. So often these days, the world seems to be swirling out of control. But in Jesus Christ, we find a faithfulness and a hope that transcends our problems and our fears. By coming to Jesus and following him down the same path as Bartimaeus, we will find a God-given story for our lives. Let’s be clear. We won’t find that all our wants are met. Bartimaeus would have found his story even if Jesus had not healed him. It was the man, not the cure. Bartimaeus wanted to see, but he found far more.

Kalas quotes Peggy Noonan, who wrote, “Life isn’t flat and thin and ‘realistic,’ it’s rich and full of mystery and surprise.” In short, true living is full of God, in whom we find rich and full lives, full of story.

² *Life from the Upside: Seeing God at work in the world*, J. Ellsworth Kalas, 2004.